**"The Virtue in the Vice: Holy Eros, Not Lust"**

**A Sermon for University Congregational Church**

**Sunday, March 27, 2022**

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Traditional Word

Expressions of Praise

7 How graceful are your feet in sandals,

O queenly maiden!

Your rounded thighs are like jewels,

the work of a master hand.

2 Your navel is a rounded bowl

that never lacks mixed wine.

Your belly is a heap of wheat,

encircled with lilies.

3 Your two breasts are like two fawns,

twins of a gazelle.

4 Your neck is like an ivory tower.

Your eyes are pools in Heshbon,

by the gate of Bath-rabbim.

Your nose is like a tower of Lebanon,

overlooking Damascus.

Contemporary Word

"I am a healthy woman with a healthy appetite." – Maya Angelou

"The Virtue in the Vice: Holy Eros, Not Lust"

What is it about human beings that compels us to seek out the company of another human? What is it within us, mere mortals, that fires in us a passion for communion with God—with something bigger than ourselves? What is it within our bones and muscles and sinew that propels us into the arms of another person? Is it simply animal programming? An instinct built into all mammals? Or is something else going on here? Would you be surprised if I told you that all of these questions have the same spark of life at their heart? And would you believe me if I told you that all of this stems from how we view our relationship with the Holy One? That yearning to belong to someone or something is mighty and drives much of our very human behavior.

Today in our work with the Virtue in the Vice, we're exploring that naughtiest of mortal sins, lust. Or, more correctly, we're trying to see if the negative judgment of lust is, in reality, something more positive that got twisted and changed into something else. In his book, The Virtue in the Vice, Rev. Dr. Robin Meyers makes the case that lust is the transactional element of sex. We reduce people to their base desires and then judge them based on that—instead of the whole of the person. He writes: "…With our Western, mechanistic view of sex as a purely physical form of competition with winners and losers, no wonder we end up "using" one another like steroids…The ancient understanding that lust as the indiscriminate consumption of the other for purely selfish pleasure had to do with physical gratification. Today we have reworked the definition of lust to fit the age of narcissism." (93)

Intimacy is the ultimate goal of any relationship. Vulnerability—empathy—consistency—these are hallmarks of people who want to have and sustain good, healthy relationships. And some of those relationships will be more intimate than others. I'm not talking sexual intimacy necessarily, but rather a soul-filled, spiritual intimacy: A connection where two people acknowledge some sort of shared energy and connection between them. Sometimes it may lead to a sexual relationship, but more often than not, it strengthens the bonds already there—it shines a light on a love that transcends our senses—and it fills us with chemicals that make us feel good. That's a lot of what I'm talking about here: chemicals.

One of my favorite professors at Phillips Seminary once commented about her son, who was soon to enter puberty. She said to us: "This sweet little boy that I taught to tie his shoes, who loves nature, and who is so open, and loving and kind, is about to become an angry, confused, oppositional teenager. And all because of hormones." Hormones are those chemicals that act on our body's cells and tissues and make them do things—like mature into adults. It makes sense to me to blame our sensual desires on hormones because that's the job of most of those hormones—to turn us into creatures that can reproduce. That's how evolution has worked in this regard. How best to ensure the propagation of humanity? Hormones! They act upon the body, causing rapid changes in the physical form. Our very human bodies mature, and the simple egg and sperm cells gear up to go out and find each other. That's what's happening here—a sperm cell is seeking out an egg cell.

And it's these same hormones that act upon the brain and make it want to reject the company of the family because evolution dictates that we reproduce with someone not of our same genetic profile. For the family line to continue as physically healthy humans, we need to seek mates outside of our community. Hormones act on the teenage brain and say:" Run away! Get out of the house", not because the teen doesn't love her family, but because hormones are acting on her brain and telling her it's time to seek a mate in another village—far from dear old mom and dad. The next time you think your teenager doesn't love you, remind yourself that he's filled with hormones and is out of his mind with chemically induced lust. A lust that will drive him away from his parents and into someone else's arms. It's natural. And it's okay.

What was once seen as wild, untamed, and animalistic behavior in the ancient world has since come to be understood as this chemically induced puberty—or madness—that humans go through to mature into adults. The next time you read one of the Apostle Paul's letters and run into his exhortations about thinking like a child, superimpose this idea of the coming chaos of the teenage mind and how Paul equates this with wild, untamed, and disordered people. To Paul, to have lust was to be in a state of animalistic desire that did not fit in the ordered society. And it certainly didn't fit in the proper Jewish community either. It was something of our youth to be put away when we reached maturity.

The Hebrew Bible says much about the sin of lust and has many remedies to return the offender, the one with lust in his heart, back into covenant with the community and with the Holy One. The original meaning of the term lust has been changed over time. In the Hebrew language, Lust originally meant "strong desire," a neutral quality in that it could be good or bad. Over time, it has developed the more negative meaning that we apply today: Strong sexual desire that is wrong, bad, or evil. The ancient Greeks knew that love (or desire) was complicated, so they had numerous terms for different kinds of love—agape is a sort of parental love. Agape love is what the Holy One might feel for us when serving in a parental role, such as asking Cain where his brother is or commanding Adam and Eve not to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. But the Greeks knew that this definition wouldn't work for others types of love, so we get the term philia, meaning brotherly love: Think Philadelphia—the City of Brotherly Love. Or any work ending in philia or its forms: Bibliophile, one who loves books, Anglophile, one who loves all things English, etc.

And of course, we had to have a word for a more sensual love, and that is the word eros from which we get the term erotic. The Greek Empire had a significant effect on the culture of all of the Mediterranean world during this time. Hellenistic philosophy and thought can be seen in much of the writings in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. And their ideas about love and sensuality permeate throughout them as well.

I don't know if you noticed yet, but the Traditional Word for this morning is pretty salacious. Did you know the Bible could be seen as pornographic? Well, it is, in places, and nowhere is it more explicitly sensual than in the Song of Solomon. Let's hear the words of the ancient Jewish writer now (mind you, I didn't choose the MOST salacious passage to read—as I would probably blush). I would rate this one PG or maybe R—hear now these ancient, naughty words:

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O queenly maiden!

Your rounded thighs are like jewels,

the work of a master hand.

2 Your navel is a rounded bowl

that never lacks mixed wine.

Your belly is a heap of wheat,

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Can't you feel the sensuality of those images? We are sensual beings—we exist in the world through the use of our senses—and some of those senses have an intimate quality. And it is in this intimacy where we are vulnerable, and it is in the moments of vulnerability where we might be changed. Being changed is a scary business. Paying attention to our senses, our sensuality is often far more terrifying. How do we square the sensuality of the Song of Solomon with the strict laws in the Hebrew Bible regarding sexual behaviors? And of all of the things to borrow (or steal) from the Jewish people, why did the developing groups of Christ-following Jews choose to keep those draconian laws—the ones dealing with sensuality—and overlook so many of the others.

An article I read preparing for this sermon said," The growing influence of a Christianity that had imported [Hebrew Bible] prohibitions and that understood sexual pleasure as contrary to Virtue made sexual behaviors easy targets for prohibition." We humans love to gossip, and what's better than salacious gossip about our most intimate secrets? Ironically, the same desire for belonging that gives us the drive to communicate--to gossip--is the same desire that drives us into each other's arms. We crave belonging so much, whether as part of a group gossiping or a couple in bed frolicking. We have this puritanical attitude towards the sensual world that says: Enjoy, but not too much. Touch, but only proper ways. Love, but not too deeply. In our modern culture, sex sells and throws all of those old, moldy prohibitions from the Pilgrims out the window and replaces them with a sort of devil-may-care attitude towards all things sexual.

In his book, The Virtue in the Vice, Dr. Robin Meyers asks this: So, "…how does one recover a healthy and holy view of human sexuality from the sexual dysfunction of our time. (97) "…how can we be both erotic AND faithful creatures?" (Meyers, 101) I think Rev. Meyers could have asked that question in First Century Palestine, and it would have felt authentic. The Romans, as pagans, held a different view on sex, one that still valued self-control but allowed vast more opportunities to lose control on occasion safely. And it is those occasions that our Jewish ancestors were so strident about proving how different Jews are and what animals the pagans were. Sexual practices were an excellent way to create a category of "other." Still is, no?

What did Jesus say about sex? Not that much. A few affiliated scriptures have him mostly decrying divorce, and the primary sex act mentioned is fornication with another man's wife—or the desire to do that. So, adultery and divorce—those bedrock challenges regarding a marriage—are the things on which Jesus focuses in this regard. And the prevailing attitude in Jesus's day was this: If your appetites were unhealthy—any sort of inebriation or passion out of control—anything that evoked an untamed spirit—this was seen as a sign of weakness. And a man or woman who had such desire for sex that they sought pleasure outside of the marital bed was obviously someone who did NOT have their emotions and passions under control. Loss of control was a significant social sin. Therefore, most of the laws and moral strictures of the time deal with behaviors that follow from this loss of control. Humans are to keep themselves well-ordered, their households well-ordered, and then the empire would be well-ordered. The Emperor is on his throne, and all is right with the world. Right?

One of the most fascinating discussions I've encountered on sensuality and sex included Maya Angelou, the esteemed poet, and how she responded to the criticism of the brutal portrayal of rape and her liberating stances on sexuality in her brilliant book I Know Why the Caged Birds Sing. In this discussion, she began talking about appetites and asking why can't women have the same appetites as men—including sexual appetites. It seems there's a double standard in the bedroom. Men come out of the bedroom as conquerers or sexual superiors—as studs—a lady's man-- when speaking of multiple partners. Women are called whores for the same behavior.

Maya Angelou biographer Mary Jane Lupton wrote this about the icon: "As a woman who loves men, [Maya] Angelou is very open about her sexual feelings, making almost no effort to conceal her inclinations. She craves sex, but she likes being satisfied. She is neither passive nor timid in approaching men. She is, in her words, a 'Healthy woman with a healthy appetite." (101) Angelou has taken her desire and put it in an ordered frame that makes sense for her. She has removed the barriers that held her back. She was explaining to us what it means to be whole. And as Robin Meyers reminds us: "As long as we put sex and soul in different compartments, a deafening silence descends between them. One seems too kinky, the other too pious. But sex is too important to be blushed off the page or pushed to the margins of our common life." The whole person recognizes their appetites and deals with them honestly. That is a whole—and holy—spiritual sensuality—a Holy eros.

Robin Meyers has some parting words on this topic of eros and lust: "With this lively Virtue [Holy Eros], everything about sex becomes more nuanced, more sophisticated, more subtle. Where we once submitted to the reciprocity of hormones, now we feast on the sweet alchemy of reciprocity itself. This is a sweet alchemy indeed. This is spiritual sex. This is holy eros." (Meyers, 109) I pray that each of you can look at your sensuality (and, by extension, sexuality) as a gift from God—not some curse to be managed. A gift from God, to be received and given. Shared at the right time and in the right spirit. Amen.

RESOURCES

*Maya Angelou: A Critical Companion* by Mary Jane Lupton

<https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/sodomy-laws>

<https://www.religioustolerance.org/sex_jesu.htm>